

Under the Stars

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Summary: Uber: Janice Covington begins a relationship with Garret Smith, descendant of the King of Thieves.

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> <meta name="Generator"> "I don't see why you're insisting on this ridiculous dress, Melinda

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****Disclaimer:** **Janice and Melinda, as well as Xena and Co., are not my property. They belong fully to MCA/Universal and Renaissance Pictures. I am simply borrowing them for the purpose of my fan fiction.

****Subtext/Sex Warning:** **None, Jan and Mel are not portrayed as lesbians in this story. Sorry, guys, but I wanted to go in another direction with these ladies.

****Other Notes:** **The character of Garrett Smith is indeed my own creation, and, as you will find out, the descendant of none other than the King of Thieves himself, our man Autolycus. It is the first story in my Garrett/Janice series.

"I don't see why you're insisting on this ridiculous dress, Melinda." Janice Covington shifted her gaze to the long mirror before her, her green eyes narrowed to scrutinize her reflection. She lifted a tanned hand to brush aside a stray curl from her forehead. "I look incredibly stupid done up like this."

"You look beautiful," Melinda disagreed. She peered anxiously over silver-rimmed glasses at her younger friend as she fiddled with the hem of the dress. She lowered her eyes back to her work. "This dress

has such lovely stitching. I wish you would tell me where you got it."

Jan snorted distastefully. "I told you. It was my mother's. My father gave it to me when I was little. Needless to say, I never thought I'd be wearing it."

Mel grinned. "Well, then," she remarked in her thinly accented voice. "This is a special occasion, isn't it?"

"No, I just couldn't find anything else to wear," Jan replied with a hint of bitterness. "I don't see why we're going to this ball, anyway. It's going to be nothing but a bunch of rich blowholes and their wives trying to out-impress each other."

"I know," Mel agreed eagerly. "Doesn't it sound just marvelous? Besides, I hear Garrett Smith will be there."

"Garrett Smith? Who's he?" Jan tugged at the waistline of her dress, scowling at her reflection.

Mel pushed herself up to a standing position then stooped over, smoothing the front of her dress. She straightened, smiling vapidly. "Only the best man in his field. Not to mention the best-looking."

Jan glanced at the other woman, reading her expression. "I should've known," she said dismally, shaking her head.

"Should've known what? Dr. Smith is supposed to be the best archaeologist of our timeâ€|"

"Not to mention the wealthiest," Jan cut in bitterly. "What is it about you and wealthy men, Mel? And they say I have a fetish for money."

A faint blush crept up Mel's face. She cast her eyes downward, carefully avoiding Jan's intent gaze. "I'm just anxious to meet him, is all. And since we're going to the same party, we may as well get acquainted, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Jan answered, her voice laced with sarcasm. "Absolutely. Come on, what are you waiting for? We have a ball to attend." Lifting her dress to her slender ankles, she strode past Mel and out the open door.

Mel followed Jan's exit with proud eyes, then hurried after her. "Why the sudden rush?" she asked breathlessly as she caught up.

Janice shrugged. "Wouldn't want to miss any of the fun, would we?"

"No," Mel agreed, "of course not." They came to a halt outside the ballroom door. Jan looked to Mel expectantly, but the other woman stared intently at the door. Mel, sensing Jan's eyes on her back, turned to face her. "I suppose we should go in."

"Yes, I suppose we should."

They lapsed into silence. After a moment Jan spoke quietly, almost

hesitantly. "Are we going in or not?"

Mel nodded, but paused with her hand on the doorknob. "What if someone recognizes me?" she asked fretfully.

Jan swept a mocking hand across her brow. "Oh, what would you do?" Mel only glared at her, her eyes boring holes into her from above those silver-rimmed glasses. Jan laughed. "I thought that was the idea," she continued. "What other reason could you possibly have for going to something like this than to be recognized? Isn't that what being rich is about, Melinda?"

Mel frowned. "Yes, something like that."

"That's what I thought." Jan hesitated no longer. Throwing open the door, she strode into the ballroom as if she owned the place and knocked someone to the ground. "Oh, I'm sorry," she exclaimed, leaning over to help the stranger up.

"Oh, don't worry about it," the man replied as he picked himself up, waving away her extended hand. "I'm knocking myself down half the time, anyway. Besides," he added slyly. "That glimpse down the front of your dress is all the apology I need." Jan's jaw dropped as her hand flew to cover her bosom. "My darling, consider yourself forgiven," the man went on, flashing her a flippant smile.

"Thank you," Jan mumbled, disoriented. The man the unbelievably handsome, charming man extended a slender hand toward her.

"Garrett Smith," he introduced himself with another of those smiles.

Jan bit her lip to keep from swooning. She spread her lips in a cheesy smile. "Janice Covington," she said smoothly.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Garrett said, brushing the back of her hand lightly with his lips. "Now that we've met, would you care to dance?"

Jan briefly considered excusing herself from his presence, then thought better of it. She only smiled as Garrett pulled her along after him toward the dance floor.

Mel, watching from the doorway, trailed them with her eyes, then, with a sigh, made her slow way toward the refreshment table. Settling herself in a plush chair, she watched the party unfold as the band started a fast jitterbug.

Jan, in the meantime, laughed with breathless delight as Garrett spun her around the dance floor. "You know," she remarked, "I don't remember the last time I danced like this!"

Garrett grinned down at her. "That's a damn shame, Miss Covington. I hate to see a woman repressed."

"It's my own choice," Jan assured him. "I get so involved in the digs, I don't even consider a social life. Melinda is constantly on my case about it."

Garrett's eyebrow shot up. "Melinda? Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yesâ€¦"

"And you haven't introduced us? Dear, if she's half as lovely as you, I'll be here all night." Jan looked to him to continue. "I don't see how I'll be able to pull myself away from _two _beautiful women."

Jan laughed. Garrett pulled her aside as the song ended and the band launched into another quick tune. "Well," she went on, taking a seat at one of the ornate tables. "Melinda is an interesting woman. We're more than friends, really. We'reâ€¦ ahâ€¦ partners."

Garrett's smile faded. "Partners? Ohâ€¦ I heard about the sort of thing before, but Iâ€¦ I guess I didn't really realizeâ€¦" He looked away, clearly embarrassed. He glanced up again, feeling a light touch on his arm.

"Dr. Smith?" Jan asked, concerned. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh, no, I justâ€¦ say, would you care for a drink? A glass of wine perhaps? I see the refreshment table right over thereâ€¦"

"Garrett," Jan interrupted. "Is something wrong? Did I say something?"

"Oh, no!" the archaeologist insisted, waving his hands urgently. "I just didn't understand your relationship withâ€¦ Melinda, wasn't it? I think I just got the wrong impression from you. You see, I thoughtâ€¦" He trailed off, flushing. "Why don't I go get those drinks?"

Jan shook her head, confused. "I don't understand." Her green eyes widened in shock. "Ohhâ€¦" she said at last. She came to her feet as Garrett started away from the table. "No!" she cried, grabbing his elbow.

"Well, I've met some pretty forceful women, but I've never known any to resort to physical attack before," Garrett admitted, pulling away from excited woman.

"I'm sorry," Jan said hurriedly, feeling the heat rise in her face. "I think you misunderstood me," she explained.

"I know," Garrett cut in. "I'm sorry. I thought you were flirting with me back there for some reason. I'm not accustomed to women knocking me over to get me to notice them," He flashed her a brilliant smile. "I thought it was your way of saying 'hello, handsome, would you like to dance?'"

Jan couldn't resist a small smile. "Actually, I was just in a rush to get in. Mel was being a complete idiot, standing outside the door, so I had to take the initiative."

"I seeâ€¦"

"No, I don't think you do. Garrettâ€¦" Jan pulled the man back down to a sitting position, and lowered herself into her own chair again.

"What did you think I meant when I said that Mel and I were more than friends?"

"Well," Garrett began, lowering his eyes uncomfortably. "To be honest, I didn't know what to thinkâ€¦ for about a split second. Then I remembered that "other" lifestyle that my cousin Richie told me about when we were boys. Suddenly it was abundantly clear."

Jan groaned. "Yeah, I thought that." She looked the other archaeologist straight in the eye. "Melinda Pappas and I are business associatesâ€¦ of sorts. She pays me to find certain rare artifacts for her."

Garrett's eyes widened. "Business associates? I thought you said you were partners."

"Wellâ€¦ I didn't know how to put it, exactly. It isn't like we work on the same level or anything. She pays me to work for her. That simple."

"So you're her employee." The man couldn't hide the relief in his voice.

"I refuse to call myself that, but yes, essentially, I am," Jan replied firmly. "And nothing about our relationship has anything to do withâ€¦" She broke off, blushing up to her roots.

"Love?" Garrett offered. He stood, brushing off the front of his suit. "You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, Janice."

Jan was grinning before she knew it. "Oh, really?"

"Absolutely," Garrett replied, placing a hand over his heart. "That means both of you are available. Seems tonight's my lucky night." Leaning over, he patted Jan's shoulder, then turned toward the refreshment tables again. "You still up for that drink? Come on," he added before turning on his heel and leaving.

Jan sucked in an irritated breath. She paused to gather the bottom of her dress, then hurried after. A hand on her elbow halted her as she passed by the hors d'oeuvres. She whirled around, her eyes flashing. "Whaâ€¦" Her voice cut off as she found herself face to face with a frantic Mel. "What do you want?" she asked sourly.

"How could you?" Mel asked sharply.

"How could I what?" Jan's voice came out tired, and slightly on the irate side.

Mel apparently didn't notice. "You left me alone. And went off gallivanting with that, thatâ€¦ fortune hunter!"

Jan rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Mel. You're plenty old enough to take care of yourself now, honey. Mommy can't hold your hand everywhere you go forever."

"Oh, youâ€¦" Mel tugged at her long hair, looking about her nervously. "What happened to the grand man, anyway? Did he get tired of you already?"

"Mel!" Jan exclaimed, astonished. Mel only stared at her blatantly. "I can't believe what a baby you're being," Jan grated. "Garrett went to get us a couple of drinks. Though I think he may change his mind when he realizes I'm not with him anymore!"

If Mel felt any remorse, she didn't show it. She only smiled, patting her friend's arm comfortingly. "I knew he wasn't right for you, Janice. I suppose if you're through with him then we can get going nowâ€¦"

"Wait a minute!" Jan said quickly, grabbing Mel's arm as she turned away from her. "It was your idea to come here in the first place. Now, we're staying, and you're going to enjoy yourself, dammit, whether you like it or not!" Mel's mouth dropped open, and she started to protest. "Ssh," Jan said, putting a hand over the other woman's mouth. "I've heard about enough from you. Look, Garrett's coming back. Do you think you can behave yourself for just one minute?"

Garrett approached the pair, a glass of red wine in each hand. He set them on the table before the women, then grinned foolishly and slapped his forehead. "Silly me," he sing-songed. "I didn't get anything for myself!" His eyes fell on Mel, who had glumly taken a seat across from the seafood tray. He presented her with a sweeping bow. "And you must be the wonderful Melinda that I've hear so much about." He paused to wink at Jan.

"You've heard about me?" Mel asked, straightening in her chair.

"Of course," Garrett assured her. "You're all that Janice here talks about. The best damn boss that a woman could dream for, that's what she says."

Mel's pale eyes grew wide. "She called me her boss?" Shaking her head, the woman got up as if in a daze and started toward the door. "Enjoy the party," she called over her shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Jan called after her.

Mel turned back to her friend. "To relish in my victory," she replied sweetly. With that, she was gone.

Garrett laughed out loud. "You're right. She is interesting. Where'd you find her? She sounds fresh off daddy's farm."

Jan shrugged. "She found me. She wanted me to unearth some secrets about the legendary Xena and Iâ€¦"

"Xena?" Garrett interrupted. "The woman warrior?"

"You've heard of her." Jan couldn't mask her surprise.

"Are you kidding? I've been researching her for months. I'd heard that someone got a hold of her scrolls, but I had no idea who. I don't supposeâ€¦"

"Yup," Jan answered. "That's us." She frowned as she noted the wondering expression on Garrett's face. "I'm not sure how Mel would feel about sharing them with anyone, though."

Garrett nodded slowly, but his eyes remained distant. Jan thought she could imagine the wheels turning behind those deep brown eyes of his. After some time, he lifted his eyes to meet hers. "It's too nice a night to stay inside, wouldn't you say? How would you like to take a walk with me?"

"I think I'd like that," Jan responded warmly. She allowed the man to take her arm in his and guide her toward the door. "I wonder if Mel went back to the room," she mused aloud. "She doesn't usually go to bed this early, but I can't imagine her out on a night like this alone."

Garrett steered them through an open door at the end of the hall and out into the cool night. He removed his coat, ready to wrap it around Jan's shoulders at the first sign of a shiver. "A night like this?" he asked at last. "What do you mean by that?"

Jan came to a stop in a small rose garden, then glanced up at the night sky, dazzled by its enormous beauty. The stars sparkled brilliantly in the clear air. "It's so beautiful," she whispered. She shook her head, snapping herself back into reality. "Mel is intimidated by the sky," she explained, kneeling down. She leaned back slightly, then sat fully on the ground, carefully covering her legs with the skirt of her dress. "I think it's the vastness of it. She can't quite grasp the enormity of it, so it bothers her."

Garrett settled himself beside Jan on the ground, holding out his coat as an offering. Jan shook her head gently, and he laid the coat out beside him. "Bothers her how?" he asked casually. His mind did not seem to be on Mel, however.

Jan shrugged. "She stays indoors when she can. She's not really the nature loving type anyway."

"Hmm," Garrett put in. He was staring intensely up at the stars. "Gorgeous, aren't they?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," Jan replied gently.

The archaeologist laughed lightly. "I used to dream about this, you know." Jan lifted an eyebrow, a gesture which Garrett took as his cue to go on. "Sitting on the ground next to a beautiful woman on a wonderful night like this—| stars so bright you feel like if you stretched just a little bit you might be able to touch them." He shook his head in despair. "If my mother were here, she'd be tanning my hide right about now."

"Oh yeah?" Jan asked, the corners of her mouth twitching with curiosity. "Why's that?"

"She was a mind-reader, my mom. She knew every time I had impure thoughts about a woman."

Jan burst out in laughter. "Meaning?"

"Meaning she'd be tanning my hide right about now," Garrett repeated, and cracked a smile. "I did mention my x-ray vision, didn't I? Oh, don't worry," he said quickly, putting a hand up. "It's not full x-ray vision. I can just see through a single layer of clothing."

Those are some nice undergarments you've got on though."

Jan laughed even harder. Finally she composed herself enough to speak again. "This was nice."

"Yeah, it was," Garrett agreed shortly. He lowered his eyes to his companion. "And you look as beautiful as when I first saw you," he continued, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"A whole hour ago," Jan added.

Garrett appeared shocked. "Has it been that long?" he asked in disbelief.

Jan nodded. "How long did you think we'd been out here? You stared at the stars about fifteen minutes before even speaking to me," she mourned dramatically.

"Hey, I can't help it if giant balls of gas have better conversation skills than you, darling. I can only give you the strength and encouragement to better yourself and the rest of the world in the process."

"Well," Jan said, "then I guess we'd better do this again soon, hadn't we?"

"I think it'd be a mistake not to," Garrett agreed, clambering to his feet. "Say a week from now? The Caf   Eyaed, that charming little place overlooking the ocean? It's rumored to have the finest cuisine in all of Greece."

"Consider it a date." Jan straightened the front of her dress as she rose to her feet.

"I most certainly will." Jan's heart fluttered as Garrett took one of her slim hands in his own and made to shake it. Then, smiling, he lifted the hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss on the back. Turning the hand over, he placed an equally gentle one on her palm, then turned and made his brisk exit from the garden.

Jan remained in the garden after he left. She bent slightly to pluck a red rose from one of the nearby bushes. Bringing the rose to her face, she inhaled its sweet scent and smiled euphorically. Its effect was intoxicating. "See you next week," Jan murmured dreamily, and headed back toward her room.

**

Chapter 2 (End)

**

Jan buried her face in the pillow as the alarm clock sounded its merciless wake-up call. She threw an arm across the bed and slapped the clock with all her might, but the blasted thing would not turn off. She balled her fist angrily. Leaning sideways in the bed, she was preparing to deliver the fatal blow when the door to the room banged open.

Mel strode in, wearing her usual sunny "morning" smile. She hummed

quietly as she switched off the alarm clock. "Rise and shine," she said.

"Rise and shine," Jan mimicked, then tossed back the covers with a sigh. She was not looking forward to another day. Mel busied herself with opening the blinds while Jan crawled out of bed, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands. The blond squinted at the bright light filtering through the open blinds. "Does it have to be so bright?" she complained, pulling on her socks.

"It's a beautiful day," Mel commented, her dreary tone contradicting her words.

"What's with you?" Jan asked as she rummaged through the small closet for her clothes. "You were chipper enough a minute ago."

"You!" Mel snapped, pushing her glasses up on her nose. "You're what's with me, Janice Covington!" Jan stared silently, waiting for her friend to continue. Finally, Mel did. "I'm sick and tired of this 'woe is me' attitude. You're going to wake up in a good mood one day, Jan, whether you like it or not! I don't have the energy to be cheerful for the both of us ****all**** of the time!"

Jan bit back a smile. "What can I say?" she asked casually. "I'm not a morning person."

Mel glowered at her, then stomped toward her own bed, muttering something under her breath. She paused as she heard the hinges of the door squeak quietly. "Where are you going?"

Jan stopped in the doorway, and glanced over her shoulder at Mel. "To the shower. Did you see if anyone was in there right now?"

Mel shrugged. "I wasn't in the washroom." She looked Jan over appraisingly. "You're going out in the hall in your pajamas?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes," Jan replied slowly. "Would you rather I went naked?"

"No!" Mel cried, her eyes widening. She threw open a drawer in the night table, then threw a pastel pink robe in the other woman's direction. "Put that on," she commanded.

Jan knit her eyebrows. "I'm just walking over to the shower, Melinda. There's only women in this hallway anyway."

"Wear the robe," Mel ordered through gritted teeth. "I will not have my roommate making a complete fool out of herself in the middle of the hotel."

Rolling her eyes, Jan covered her slender frame with the robe and started into the hall. She stopped just outside the door and put her ear to the door listening for Mel. After a moment she turned away. Sure she was safe from her friend's reach, she untied the silk cord of the robe. She paused to step out of the fine robe, then, leaving the robe lying in a heap outside of hers and Mel's shared room, started down the hall in pajamas and socks.

The washroom was only a few doors away from hers. The door was marked with a white powder puff painted on the dark oak. Jan pushed the door

open and stepped into the pristine washroom. She didn't believe for the world that Mel had not come through in the past hour or so; the room still stank of the rancid perfume that she insisted on. Jan locked the door to the room and quickly undressed, then stepped into the roomy shower.

Once washed, the small woman quickly toweled herself dry and pulled on her brown trousers and work clothes. She left the washroom a moment, later, her hair still dripping. She stooped over just outside the bedroom door to retrieve the pink robe, then turned the knob on the door. It was locked.

"Melinda!" Jan muttered under her breath. She curled her right hand into a fist and pounded on the door. She clutched the clothing in her left hand to her chest as she waited for a response from inside the room. There was none. She raised her fist, pounded again. Still she received no response. "Mel!" she shouted, pounding harder on the door. Her fists were starting to ache from the abuse. "Open this door Mel! I know you're in there! Melinda Pappas, if you don't open this door right now I'll!"

"Janice?"

Jan whirled, her eyes growing wide. Melinda stood behind her, pale face composed. Her expression was somber, but her eyes shone a little too brightly in their sockets. Her pink lips twitched slightly in her attempt to keep from smiling.

"Where'd you go?" Jan asked sharply. She struggled to appear nonchalant as she scanned the hall for other witnesses. They at least appeared to be alone in the hall.
> <p>

"I was taking care of something," Mel answered vaguely, then unlocked the door to the room. Walking inside, she switched on the light, then removed her blazer and tossed it on her bed. "I don't know how many times I've told you to take a key with you whenever you leave the room," she chided Jan gently.

Jan didn't respond to her last comment, but picked up her keys off of the small bureau nonetheless. "What were you taking care of?" she asked, sinking onto her bed. She ran her fingers through her wet hair, checking for tangles. She reached for her brush and started to work out some small snags in the back.

"Something," Mel replied quietly. "You'll see."

"Sounds mysterious."

"Well, I don't know about that," Mel said thoughtfully. "I got a call from Mitchell and he said we needed to be back at the dig by this afternoon. I told him it would be all right. Is that okay?"

Jan nodded. "So is that the "something" that you took care of?"

Mel bit her lip, and her brow wrinkled in a frown. "Sort of! they have something to do with each other, I guess."

"Hmm!" sounds interesting. You've definitely peaked my interest," Jan said, rising from the bed. She lumbered over to Mel's bed a few

feet away, then dropped onto it with a thud. Mel watched with a disapproving frown as Jan wriggled around on the perfectly smoothed comforter. Wrinkles and folds popped out all over the place on the fine comforter and sheet poking out from beneath.

Jan glanced up at Mel then, just noticing her friend's scowl. "What's wrong?" she asked, genuinely concerned.

Mel continued to scowl at her for another moment, then sighed. "You're just messing up my bed is all," she explained.

Jan shrugged. "You're not going to be sleeping in it anymore anyway."

"That's not the point," Mel protested. She finished gathering her clothing and zipped the leather suitcase. "Are you ready to go?"

"I just have to throw my clothes in my bag and I'll be ready."

Mel flinched. "You're going to fold them, right?" she asked in a strangled voice.

"Why bother?" Jan asked, shrugging again. She opened the closet and removed the rest of her clothes. She was packed in under a minute. Rubbing her hands together, she faced Mel again. "I'm ready to go if you are. Are we driving ourselves?"

"No," Mel responded hastily. "Harjeim will drive us to the dig and there'll be someone there to pick us up and drive us to the tents."

"So, no," Jan said, grabbing up her bags. "Let's go then."

The drive over was, unsurprisingly, uneventful. Mel, as usual, kept her nose buried in a book the entire way over, leaving Jan to three long hours of utter boredom as the driver, Harjeim, babbled in broken English about the last archaeologist he had driven to the site. Suddenly something caught her attention.

"What did you say his name was?" she interrupted excitedly, leaning forward in her seat.

Mel, in the front passenger seat, lifted her eyes from her book and glanced over her shoulder at Jan curiously. She didn't seem to have heard the last bit of Harjeim's ramblings.

"Dr. Smith," the driver said hurriedly. "He wasâ€¦"

"Garrett Smith?" Jan cut in quickly. Mel's eyes widened.

"Yes, that was it," the driver said. "He say he have aâ€¦"

"Proposition?" Mel asked.

"Yes, yes, proposition. He say he have a proposition for some ladies there."

"That's us," Mel said matter-of-factly. "I knew there was something about that manâ€¦"

Jan collapsed back in her seat, stunned. "You don't think he plans on buying us out, do you Mel?"

"Well, I can't see what else he would be doing," Mel responded reluctantly. "You heard what Harjeim said. He's definitely up to something."

"I heard what Harjeim said," Jan muttered sullenly. "I don't see how you did, though, with your face buried in that book. You certainly didn't seem to have anything to say at the time."

"I didn't know who he was talking about!" Mel protested.

"A proposition," Jan murmured. The word tasted nasty in her mouth—propositions in her field were generally greeted with suspicion and dislike, and for good reason. Her last proposition had come from Melinda, and it had nearly ended in worldwide chaos. The memory brought a twinge of anger, which Jan quickly repressed. There was no time for that now.

Mel twisted around in her seat to face Jan. "Whatever Garrett tries to sell you, don't buy it. You saw how smooth he is; you'll lose the dig and everything we have in ten seconds flat if you let him sweet-talk you again."

"What?" Jan stared at her friend blankly, sure Mel had lost her mind. "I'm not planning on buying anything, Mel. Just what do you think Garrett is up to, anyway? He already told me he had an interest in Xena and her scrolls—maybe he just wants to start a partnership."

"A partnership?" Mel sounded dubious. "That doesn't sound like Garrett Smith at all."

"You don't even know him!" Jan protested.

"But I know of him," Mel said calmly. "I know his reputation. He's a 'take-all' sort of guy. He'll do anything to get something he really wants, even if it means hanging someone out to dry." She paused, and pursed her lips. "Remember Wallace Kramer?"

"Yes," Jan said, sighing. "Let me guess—"

"Garrett Smith bought the rights to his entire project, of course promising him a slice of the profits they made when they sold. Would you care to guess how much Kramer got from the deal? Come on, guess."

Jan shut her eyes wearily. "How many times do I have to tell you, Mel? I'm not my father, I'm not even interested in the money."

"You need money to stay alive," Mel said through gritted teeth. "He got ten thousand. Ten thousand dollars, Janice, and Garrett kept the other million. Is that what you want?"

"I don't want anything. No wait—I want you to leave me alone and let me ride the rest of the way to the dig in peace, all right?" Jan folded her arms across her chest, signaling the end of the conversation.

Mel glared at her younger friend for a moment before turning around again in her seat. They rode the rest of the way in silence.

"Janice Covington, I presume?"

"Yes," Jan said slowly, allowing the stranger to help her out of the car. "And you must be—"

"George Pallace. I'm an associate of Dr. Smith's. When he heard you'd be arriving on the dig today he asked that I drive you and your lady friend to your tents."

"My lady friend? Oh, you must mean Melinda. I wouldn't call her a friend, really. More like an irritation."

George laughed heartily as he escorted Jan away from the sand-smeared truck to his own slick black car. Jan eyed the car with wary distaste. "Isn't this a little ostentatious— not to mention impractical?"

George nodded. "Dr. Smith insists, though. He says that out in the world appearances count for everything. It's his philosophy."

"His philosophy, huh?" Jan asked, taking a seat inside the car. "Well, he certainly has an excellent grasp of that concept, hasn't he?"

George smiled again, then returned to the other car to get Mel. Jan watched sourly as George led Mel by the arm toward the car, then guided her into the seat beside her. Mel set herself to work immediately, smoothing the front of her pale blue skirt. "Thank you, George," she said sweetly as the man smiled and closed the door. Sensing Jan's eyes on her, Mel faced her younger friend. "What?" she asked, unable to hide her irritation.

"One minute you're calling him a dirty scoundrel and the next you're accepting rides in his personal limousine? Real classy, Mel," Jan accused, glaring out the side window.

"Well, I don't see you climbing out of the car! And I did not call Garrett Smith a dirty scoundrel! I merely pointed out some of his— flaws— to you," Mel said defensively. She folded her arms across his chest.

Jan sighed heavily, and leaned her head against the back of the seat. "This is stupid," she remarked after a moment.

Mel looked over at her cautiously, her eyes full of mistrust. "What is?"

"This fighting. It's just ridiculous," Jan went on. She leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands as the car lurched into motion. She frowned. "If he had his own limo why did he have to have Harjeim drive him to the dig from the city?"

Mel shrugged. "I guess you can ask him when we see him."

"Oh, I'll ask him that." The young woman's face darkened. "Among other things." She remained still for a moment, then shifted restlessly in her seat. "Do you really think we have to worry about Garrett?" she asked at last.

Mel shifted uncomfortably. "It just seems a little odd that he would decide to take a trip to the dig out of the blue. And we know he has a reputation for ruthlessnessâ€¦"

"No," Jan interrupted, putting up a hand to halt the older woman. "You know his reputation for ruthlessness. You very kindly kept that detail from me."

"I didn't thinkâ€¦"

"What?" Jan asked shortly. Her eyes bore into the side of Mel's face.

At last Mel turned to face her, tears glimmering in her eyes. "You didn't exactly act like you wanted to know, Janice. I didn't know he was going to do this to you." She wrung her hands, and glanced down at her lap nervously.

Jan let out another long sigh. "Look, it's not that big of a deal. We don't even know what Garrett wants yet."

"But we do!" Mel's eyes and nose shone red with her agony. "You're going to lose your dig, and your crew, and your money, and your _dignity _and it's all my fault!" she wailed, then broke down completely.

Jan squirmed closer to her in the back seat of the limo, draping an arm around Mel's shaking shoulders. Closing her eyes, she prayed that their suspicions were wrong.

The car came to a quick halt several moments later. There was a loud crash and then, unsurprisingly, a powerful jolt. Mel screamed as she and Jan were thrown forward in their seats. Jan managed to put a hand up just before her head crashed into the large glass panel in front of them.

The door came open with a jerk. George poked his head into the car, his eyes wild. "Are you two okay?" he asked. His voice was just a touch breathy.

"We're fine," Jan growled, crawling over Mel to exit the car. "What the hell was that crash?"

"Oh, that?" George asked vaguely, glancing around innocently. "Oh, that was nothing. Don't worry about it." He glanced back inside to see Mel. "Are you sure you're all right, Dr. Pappas?"

Mel pushed George out of the way as she shoved out of the limousine. "Oh, just fine," she said rudely, then strode a few feet away to stand by herself.

George grimaced. "I hope she's really all right," he mourned.

"She's fine," Jan insisted. "Now, why don't you show me how much

damage you did to Dr. Smith's limo." She and George walked to the front of the car to survey the damage. The target of the crash had been a several-foot tall statue of stone, obviously crude and fairly ancient. It lay shattered before the chrome front of the limousine.

Jan heard a door bang open and glanced up in time to see someone come running from the modest mobile home twenty or so yards away. The man, clad in khaki pants and a simple cream colored shirt, raced toward the limousine. He called out in a panic-stricken voice as he approached them. "What happened?!" He slowed, then came to halt, his hands flying to his head.

"Well," Jan drawled, placing her hands on her hips. "Hello, Garrett."

Garrett's eyes darted back and forth between the broken statue and her, then rested at last on the archaeologist. "Did you do this?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Yes, Garrett. I drove your limousine."

Garrett hung his head for a moment, then looked up slowly at George. "Do you realize how valuable that statue was, you moron?"

Jan's jaw dropped. Was this the same man that she had danced with less than a week earlier? She watched and listened as he cut into George for the damage to the statue and car, barely recognizing him. Finally she stepped between the two men, glaring at each in turn. "Now listen," she grated from between clenched teeth. "I have had a very bad day today, and you two arguing is only making it worse. Here's how I see it: George isn't even the one who hit the statue with the car, the driver did, but he's extremely sorry, and now we need to get inside." She directed her gaze at Garrett. "We have a lot to talk about."

That said, she strode past the shocked men and into the mobile home. George and Garrett glanced at each other, then followed after. As they passed Mel, the archaeologist threw out her arm to stop George. "Come with me," she said quickly.

"Go withâ€¦?" George stammered. He looked to Garrett for support, but the other man just motioned toward the door impatiently. George protested mildly as Mel dragged him toward the opposite end of the small camp.

Garrett continued on, pausing only to remove his hat before entering the cool home. Jan unfolded her arms as he approached her, and placed her hands instead on the wooden back of a chair.

"You're a little early for our date, Garrett," she said calmly, staring down at the table before her.

Garrett cleared his throat. "Well, I have a proposition for you, Janice, and it just couldn't wait until Saturday."

"Oh, I see," Jan said, nodding. "Well, here, let me make it easy for you. You can offer me whatever you wantâ€¦ I won't take it. I'm not interested in doing business with you, Dr. Smith. I don't think I can trust you, if you want to know the truth."

Garrett appeared shocked. "You hardly know me," he protested.

"I know your type."

"My type?" Garrett asked incredulously. "What type is that? You haven't even given me a chance, Janiceâ€|"

"I told you, I'm not interested. And you can refer to me as Dr. Covington when we're conducting business, thank you very much," Jan added, with a faintly bitter note.

Garrett shook his head mournfully, eyeing Jan with sorrowful eyes. "You have no idea what you're passing up, Dr. Covington."

Jan grunted. "I'm not interested in your money, if that's what you mean. And now that your true personality has shot to hell every contrived belief I had that you were a decent person I'm not interested in you either!" She struggled to fight tears as her anger consumed her. What was it about this man? She'd never met anyone who could get her so worked up. Sniffing loudly, she pushed toward the door, nearly bowling Garrett over as he stepped in front to bar her way.

"Would you listen, Janice? Just for a minute, please?" he pleaded, catching hold of her arms in his hands.

Jan started to protest, then lowered her head and nodded. She kept her eyes carefully lowered as Garrett led her to a small couch. They sat side-by-side on the couch, their bodies just a breath's width apart. Jan shivered as light electricity coursed through her veins as his hip brushed lightly against her side.

Garrett frowned, and stared absently at the back of his hands. After a long moment, he glanced up at his companion. "I wasn't planning on cheating you, Janice. I wouldn't do that."

"Why should I believe that?" Jan asked incredulously. "Now that I know who you are, how can you expect me to believe that?"

"Who I am?" Garrett protested. "You're going to take every thing that partner of yours says seriously, aren't you? Don't look at me like thatâ€| I knew she had a problem with me as soon as I met her the other night."

"Well," Jan said, her eyes widening. "It wouldn't been nice for someone to clue me in on all of this. It's quite a shock, you know, to find out on the way to your dig that some weasel is planning on buying you out and selling you short."

Garrett rolled his eyes. "Please," he said. "You can't think I would do that, now can you? Little old me? How could a swell guy like myself do such a thing to a beautiful woman like you?"

"Don't Garrett." Jan brushed his hand off of her shoulder, shrugging away from him. "You can turn off the charm. I'm not falling for it again." Garrett said nothing, but shrank away from her, his expression grave. "I know what you're up to Garrett, and I don't like it one bit."

"Oh really?" Garrett asked, his eyebrows shooting up. "What exactly am I up to?"

Jan leaned forward, and rested her elbows on her thighs as she fidgeted nervously with her hands. "You want to get me to sell to you; the dig, the crew, the whole project. Get all of the Xena Scrolls in your possession and then sell them at ridiculous prices to the highest bidder. Keep most of the profits for yourself and scrape up whatever's left for me. Or isn't that how you work?"

Garrett bit his lip. "All right," he conceded. Jan shook her head, then started to rise from the couch. Garrett grabbed her arm forcefully, pulling her down into a sitting position again. "I admit that that's how I generally operate, yes. But not this time. I want to go into an honest partnership with you, split everything right up the middleâ€¦ that means the labor, the crew, everything."

"The moneyâ€¦" Jan ventured.

"Actually, I wasn't planning on selling," Garrett said quietly.

"You weren't planning onâ€¦" Jan shook her head, laughing bitterly. "Oh, this is just precious, Garrett. Do you think I was born yesterday? What would you want with a bunch of dusty old scrollsâ€¦ especially when you know you could make a fortune selling them."

"I have a vested interest in them," Garrett responded vaguely.

"Well, I'd love to hear what that interest is."

Garrett shifted positions on the couch, frowning slightly as he regarded Jan. When he spoke, it was as if every word were being dragged from his lips. "I come from a long line of bastards," he began, then cut off sharply as Jan burst into helpless gales of laughter. "Not that kind of bastard," he muttered sourly. He shifted nervously, waiting for her laughter to die down. At last Jan quieted, and Garrett began again.

"The women in my family aren't what you would call real ladies. I believe the word for the whole lot of them would be slut." He ignored Jan's pointed grin. "Anyway, since I never knew my real fatherâ€¦ my mother told me he died before my birthâ€¦ I decided to do a little research and find out where I came from." His eyes came alight as he reached the obvious conclusion to his story. "You wouldn't believe who I tracked my lineage to."

Garrett got quickly to his feet and crossed quickly to the table Jan had earlier looked upon. He returned to the couch with a worn, dirty parchment, rolled and tied with a short red ribbon. He hastily removed the ribbon and unrolled the parchment, displaying it for both he and Jan to see.

"See this?" he asked, indicating the scroll with a jab of his finger. "This is one of the scrolls of the bard, Gabrielle. She traveled with Xena." Jan rolled her eyes, but remained attentive as the man continued. "It describes a journey they had once, with a manâ€¦" His eyes glimmered proudly. "Autolycus, King of Thieves, as it says here," he said excitedly, pointing. Jan simply nodded. Garrett lifted his eyes to meet Jan's. "My great-great-greatâ€¦ you get the

pictureâ€| my grandfather," he finished proudly.

Jan nodded, carefully concealing her shock. "So you're the descendant of a thief? How appropriate." Garrett's face fell. Jan suppressed the wild urge to smile, and stared at the man intently instead. "So this is why you're so interested in my project," she concluded, pursing her lips.

Garrett nodded. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I've never been a part of something great, Janice. This Autolycusâ€| well, from what it sounds like, he was a legendary man. A wonderful man. Gabrielle goes on more about his "heart of gold" in her scrolls than any of his exploits as a thief."

Jan smiled openly now. "Am I supposed to make some comparison?" she asked mildly.

Garrett ignored the question. "Soâ€|" he said thoughtfully. "Would you even be willing to consider a partnership? I did, after all, pour my heart out to you."

Jan crossed her arms and frowned at the floor for a moment, considering. When she at last glanced up at Garrett again, she found him staring anxiously at her. His shining eyes betrayed his anticipation. Well, it would be definitely be interestingâ€| "How do I know this isn't just another one of your ploys?" she asked pointedly.

Garrett took her hand in his, and stared into her eyes. "Well, I guess you'll just have to trust me."

Jan sneered. "That's a lot to ask."

"That's all I ask," Garrett shot back, then slid slightly away from, watching anxiously as she pretended to continue considering.

Finally, Jan got to her feet, and brushed off the front of her pants. She glanced down casually at the eager Garrett, then walked toward the door. "We'll sign the papers this evening," she called over her shoulder, then stepped outside into the bright afternoon.

She smiled as she saw Mel a few feet away, talking quietly with George, but she only waved and moved on past them. Her thoughts drifted to Garrett and everything that he had said inside the cool mobile home. With Garrett as a partner, who knew what was in store for her in the future?

Whatever it was, it was bound to be interesting.

End
file.